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ABSTRACT

College students are often faced with a variety of writing assignments which might ask them to analyze data showing cause and effect, compose a sonnet, or creatively analyze a classic short story. To tackle these kinds of assignments, they must disregard traditional and often misleading definitions of analytical and creative writing which lead them to believe they must possess a special kind of imagination in order to write creatively. Tutors at Bloomsburg University (Pennsylvania) Writing Center who write creatively have discovered that the most interesting and most thoroughly developed writing is a synthesis of analysis and creativity. They are able to help the students they tutor to push the grading criteria for the paper to the back of their minds, and concentrate on the writing itself. In the process students relax and let their ideas loose and are consequently able to create a worthy piece of creative writing which meets the criteria for the "A" grade as well. (NH)

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Tales From Creatively-Inclined Peer Tutors: Making Facts Dance

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College students are often faced with one or more of the following three assignments:

1) Research, compile data, and analyze. Show cause and effect. Avoid flowery language and abstract references; develop a clear-cut and concise argument. Write analytically but remember to be creative.

2) Read a Shakespearean sonnet and compose one yourself.

3) Choose two of Hemingway's short stories and compare and creatively analyze his use of imagery.

Faced with these three assignments, many college students readily tackle the first, but often become discouraged by the second and third. Why do the second and third assignments present so much difficulty for many students? Both assignments require analytical and creative writing. However, the amount of analysis and creativity desired by the instructors differs, as does the intention of their assignments. While the first instructor wants "just the facts," the second and third instructors seek a more personal level of writing. For students to tackle these three assignments, they must disregard traditional and often misleading definitions of analytical and creative writing.

Traditionally, most people associate analytical writing with logic rather than reflection. Analysis often involves separating or distinguishing between a subject's components to discover its true nature or inner relationships. When a history professor asks his/her students to analyze the outcome of the Civil War or to trace the development of the Civil Rights Movement, these assignments are received with little protest. Most students feel comfortable with such assignments because, while they must include their own interpretations, most of the assignments' contents are easily found by going to the

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library. Instead of incorporating creativity into the paper to make it more interesting, students often choose to produce dry, factual accounts when writing analytically.

To a traditionalist, creative writing entails excessive use of flowery language: the more adjectives the better, pile on the imagery, and smother the reader with narrative detail. Intellect has nothing to do with writing creatively; one simply needs a vivid imagination. Unless students can pick shapes out of the clouds, forget about learning how to write creatively!

However, definitions of creative and analytical writing, such as the two that are discussed, are extremely stereotypical and misleading. Unfortunately, while these definitions may seem exaggerated, students often encounter similar versions that are only slightly watered down. Because students believe they must possess a special kind of imagination in order to write creatively and because many instructors often require students to write strictly analytically, students lose the opportunity to explore creative composition.

So how do students cope with the sinking feeling they experience when realizing they must write creatively in an Introduction to Literature course? Thrust into this foreign world of creative writing, many students see their inability to adjust smoothly to creative writing as a reflection of their entire writing and academic abilities. Students become discouraged easily, often feeling that assignments are impossible and that they are falling behind their peers. Because our society conditions students to believe grades are more important than learning for learning's sake, students begin to panic. Introduction to Literature becomes a menace, looming darkly each Wednesday at ten o'clock, intent on destroying hard-earned grade point averages.

As Bloomsburg University Writing Center tutors, we want to counter these feelings of hopelessness, and offer suggestions enabling a smooth transition between analytical and creative writing styles. Students should also realize that analytical writing can include creativity and creative writing often involves analysis. Writing Center peer tutors must help students see that feelings of inadequate creative writing skills are normal. It is important

for tutors to show tutees their creative side. Everyone is creative in some way; students simply need to tap into that creativity (and avoid condemning themselves as poor writers). While students who seek peer tutoring may not become adept at deciphering the hidden shapes in clouds, peer tutoring will help to alleviate feelings of discouragement and inadequacy.

In a recent tutoring session, an undergraduate (Amy) felt, in her words, incompetent. Amy came to the Bloomsburg Writing Center expecting a miracle. She had enrolled in an upper level literature course because she thought it would be "fun." Little did she realize that she would soon face the difficult task of interpreting works on her own and writing about them for a grade. When Amy first came to the Writing Center, she said that she did not belong in college. Everyone else in her literature class was smarter than she, and most of all, she felt that there was no way she would ever pass the class. During successive sessions, Amy and the tutor discussed many possible ways to include creativity in her writing. She realized that it was all right to have her own feelings in a class without her professor's force feeding her information. With a little hard work and self examination, Amy found her creative edge, and continues to schedule creativity requiring classes.

So what makes Writing Center peer tutors experts on creative writing? Actually, we don't believe that peer tutors are not experts on creative writing, or any form of writing. However, Writing Center peer tutors often possess a love of writing, reading, and an insatiable desire to learn about writing. Not surprisingly, the best writers often read voraciously on their own. Strong reading skills are essential in either analytical or creative writing; strong readers are better able to locate the ax that an author grinds. Through stronger reading skills, picking out recurrent themes, an inescapable part of analysis, no longer seems insurmountable. Furthermore, peer tutors who particularly enjoy reading poetry or prose can offer fresh insights, pointing students toward overlooked interpretations. Because peer tutors actually enjoy writing, they have the ability to

incorporate both creative and analytical writing in their papers. Many peer tutors, in their search for the secret to this smooth transition, discover that the most interesting and most thoroughly developed writing is a synthesis of analysis and creativity. Peer tutors who write creatively, whether poetry or prose, often easily handle this transition; synthesizing analysis and creativity seems second nature. For example, several Bloomsburg Writing Center tutors often find themselves in rather intense poem editing sessions. They have reached a point in their writing styles that allows them to bring analytical aspects into their poetry. It is not uncommon for these tutors to sit down for hours in order for their poetry to look good on paper or limit wordiness, searching for more precise meanings. Once tutors learn the secret of this transition, whether they write creatively on their own or not, they eagerly await students who desire learning the secret too. Unfortunately, many students seek help because they feel a need to, not because they want to. The "A-grade syndrome," that inevitable drive to achieve good grades, often propels disillusioned students to seek help; consequently, overcoming the "A-grade syndrome" is the first step to becoming a creative writer.

As difficult, and unrealistic as this suggestion may sound, students must push the grading criteria for papers into the back of their minds, and instead concentrate on the writing itself. Focusing on grades will only add to students' frustration, preventing them from concentrating on creative writing. Few students realize that if they relax and let their ideas loose, they will produce a worthy piece of creative writing, and the "A" often follows. More professors should take into account the wariness students feel when asked to write creatively, especially in cases like English 101, when many students are first introduced to the world of writing. Students need to learn how to write first before worrying about a grade. In a Creative Writing Poetry class that a Bloomsburg tutor took, the professor assigned the composition of eight poems: four poems were not graded, one was graded but not recorded, and three were graded and recorded. Because the professor de-emphasized grades, writing creatively became easier. Rather than viewing assignments

as tedious and impossible, the students grew less inhibited and more willing to incorporate their feelings in their writing.

Keeping a journal also seems to help students who need or want to learn creative writing skills. By free-writing in a daily journal, students sharpen their observational skills and become less inhibited. Writing in a journal encourages students to record their impressions and feelings candidly, paying close attention to detail. While some people may feel filling pages with jumbles of words, phrases, and even sketches simply wastes valuable time that students could spend on their actual assignments, journal writing puts students at ease. Journal writing serves as a warm-up exercise that gets all the creative and analytical juices flowing. Like any other area of life, writing requires practice and with free-writing comes better writers.

Several Bloomsburg Writing Center peer tutors who have an interest in creative writing also recommend in text annotations. This practice serves as an effective organizing tool. If students can extract key ideas, whether they are reading about the Civil War or A Farewell to Arms by Hemingway, they will find that the paper virtually writes itself. Noting key ideas in the beginning enables students to gain a preliminary focus or direction for their paper. Organizing these notes into a rough outline further simplifies the actual task of writing; after all, who doesn't want to make actually writing the assignment as easy as possible?

The main road to easy writing entails a four step process: overcome the "A-grade syndrome", build self- confidence, free-write in a daily journal , and develop stronger reading skills. Most of the frustrated students who visit Writing Centers will eventually come to realize that they can successfully incorporate analysis and creativity into writing, producing a more polished product. Students who combine analysis and creativity are often the best writers; they feel comfortable with their ability to synthesize the two writing styles,and are not afraid to experiment.